

**Psychology Externship Program
VA Medical Center
Northport, New York**



Northport VAMC campus

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(this document is updated at least annually)

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Introduction

The Northport VAMC is located in Suffolk County, approximately 40 miles from midtown Manhattan. Opened in 1928 as a psychiatric hospital, the VA Medical Center at Northport was converted to a full service Medical Center in 1971. The Northport VAMC provides inpatient medical, surgical, and psychiatric treatment. There is also nursing home care and residential treatment for substance abuse and PTSD. Over 600,000 medical and psychiatric outpatient visits were made last year to the Medical Center and to its Community Based Outpatient Clinics throughout Long Island. The Northport VAMC is accredited by The Joint Commission and is a clinical campus of the School of Medicine at Stony Brook University. Several programs are accredited by The Commission on Accreditation for Rehabilitation Facilities.

Active duty service members and veterans who received an Honorable Discharge from the military are eligible to utilize the VA for their mental and physical health needs. There are approximately 79,0000 veterans living in Suffolk County alone, and the Northport VAMC attracts many more veterans from throughout the New York metropolitan area. Over 29,000 veterans sought care at Northport VAMC within the last year. The veteran population reflects the demographics of the area and represents military service periods from WW II to today's Global War on Terror. The population is therefore diverse in age, ethnic background, disability status, clinical presentation, and range of functioning. Since veterans often present with medical, psychiatric, and psychosocial needs the VA takes an integrated approach to care.

The Psychology Service at the Northport VA Medical Center is an autonomous service headed by a Chief, and includes 23 full-time and two part-time psychologists. The range of professional activities conducted is exceptionally wide. Generally, psychologists are members of multidisciplinary treatment teams and, in some cases, are directors of treatment programs. Staff members conduct psychological and neuropsychological assessments and provide psychotherapy and behavioral treatments. Psychologists also provide consultation to other health care providers.

Overview of the Externship

The Northport VA psychology service is committed to the professional development of its externs. Our mission is to provide clinical training that focuses on the advancement of skill in the delivery of psychotherapy and assessment, greater comfort in a multidisciplinary medical setting, and an increased confidence in the role of a culturally sensitive and ethically responsible psychologist. The externship program emphasizes service delivery in a nurturing atmosphere. Training is developmental in nature such that we consider each extern's current level of mastery and ability to work autonomously in specific competency areas. For example, an extern who initially co-leads a group may later facilitate independently. Supervision likewise begins with direct observation and may culminate in a more consultative role.

Externs model the functions of a psychologist in the setting in which he/she is assigned. Depending on the track this may include participation in interdisciplinary meetings, the delivery of therapy, conducting intakes, the provision of evidence based treatments, assessment, crisis intervention, safety planning, consultation with other providers, and/ or documentation in the computerized medical record. Opportunities for therapeutic intervention may include neuropsychological assessment, short-term and long-term individual therapy, couples therapy,

and process-oriented and psychoeducational group treatment. Attention to diversity and individual differences is integral to all training experiences.

Our psychologists are trained in a broad range of orientations including psychodynamic therapy, CBT, and third-wave models. The integration of science and practice is emphasized in all supervisory approaches. Training in evidence based protocols (EBPs) and skills, including Prolonged Exposure, CBT-Insomnia, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Cognitive Processing Therapy, CBT-Depression, Motivational Interviewing, CBT-Pain, and Psychodynamic Psychotherapy, are offered at the beginning of the year. An extern may choose to participate in as many of these trainings as he/she wishes for didactic and/or clinical purposes.

Externs may also elect to participate in the didactic seminars and/or our Multicultural Diversity Committee. Seminars cover a wide range of topics on psychotherapeutic interventions and assessment, diversity, career planning, and issues specific to a military population. We welcome extern participation in program evaluation or initiation / contribution to a performance improvement project.

We offer a range of tracks to choose from. A description of these opportunities is provided on the pages that follow. Externs have the option of supplementary clinical experiences. This may include an individual psychotherapy case from the outpatient mental health clinic (which is available to veterans of all service eras) or a psychotherapy group in a setting outside of your track.

We are happy to accept applications to our APA accredited internship program from our current and past externs. Information on our internship is available at <https://www.va.gov/northport-health-care/work-with-us/internships-and-fellowships/>.

Response to COVID-19

The unique challenges of the pandemic and its unpredictable course has given staff, trainees, and veterans an opportunity to work together to provide care in new ways that allow us to remain safe without compromising the quality of that care. Likewise, our supervisors' dedication to training has ensured that learning experiences maintain the same standards of excellence and commitment as any other time.

As of this writing in July 2022, all employees (i.e., staff, interns, fellows) have returned to work on campus. Currently all outpatient visits, supervision, and training didactics are a combination of telehealth/ virtual platforms and in person visits, depending on the comfort of staff and patients. Externs are given training in telehealth, including education on and access to platforms unique to the VA. These platforms allow multiple providers and/or veterans to participate in clinical services or meetings. Like staff, extern offices are private and include access to webcams. All resources are being made available in the trainee telematerial share folder. We have also added didactics on issues unique to working virtually (e.g., crisis management). All individuals must wear a facemask when walking on campus. Patients entering the ER or an inpatient unit are being tested for COVID-19 prior to placement.

Since the landscape is evolving, we cannot definitively predict how the next training year will look, however, we expect telehealth to remain part of our work. We will communicate any hospital wide changes with you and your university and work collaboratively to ensure your training continues in a safe manner (e.g., remote work).

Requirements

The training year begins the first week of August and ends the last week of May. A commitment of 16 hours per week is required. Typically the day begins at 8am and ends at 4:30pm. Specific days are individualized based on the extern's availability and the program's needs. Externs have off all Federal holidays and may take leave (not to exceed 8 days) with appropriate notice. Externs are expected to adhere to VA policy. An orientation to the VA and psychology service will occur the first week of externship. Externships are not funded positions.

Tracks

The following tracks are available. Please choose one or two tracks for consideration. Each track is a 2 day commitment. As noted above there are opportunities for supplementary clinical and didactic experiences.

Access Center

The Dual Diagnosis Recovery track is a track in Access Center which is where outpatient substance abuse treatment is conducted. The dual diagnosis track aims to improve the quality of life for veterans with co-occurring severe and persistent mental illness and active substance use disorders by integrating substance abuse services with traditional mental health care. The core philosophy rests on the principles of bio-psychosocial rehabilitation, combining pharmacological, psychological, educational, and social interventions to assist the veteran to stabilize his/her illness and when possible, to establish a meaningful role in the community. Interventions will be culturally sensitive, dignifying, and respectful of individuality. Therapists in this program endeavor to establish therapeutic relationships with veterans that are free of power struggles, collaborative, draw upon existing strengths, and are focused on instilling hope.

Possible clinical activities: Externs participating in the dual diagnosis track will be involved, under appropriate supervision, in the provision of group psychotherapy, group psychoeducation as well as individual psychotherapy cases when more intensive work is needed. Students will also have the opportunity to work with a wider cross section of clients in Access Center in the psychoeducation classes. Psychoeducation may include opportunities such as Relapse Prevention, Anger Management, Pain Management, STAIR, Seeking Safety, and Dialectical Behavior Therapy. Crisis intervention skills will also be developed as frequent risk assessments will be conducted on clients to determine if a higher level of care is warranted given veteran's fast changing presentations that can accompany active substance use. Possible opportunities depending on the needs of the client may involve accompanying veteran to emergency room if inpatient admission is appropriate, consulting and collaborating with inpatient and outpatient IDT teams to facilitate treatment, and providing informal support to family members regarding veteran's current struggles. Telephone assessment and crisis support when needed will also be

done. In these calls the focus will be placed on assessment of safety, and when appropriate contacting police if a wellness check is deemed necessary. Externs will also be involved in chart review, screening, intakes, and treatment planning as appropriate.

Recommended year of training or experience by start of externship: 3rd year and above

Days: Flexible Schedule: Monday, Tuesday, Thursday are primary group days

Assessment (Inpatient and Outpatient)

Assessment is a core clinical competency for psychologists. During this externship experience, the trainee will obtain a very strong understanding/further development of assessment as it relates to neuropsychological and psychological aspects of patient care. This will be done via both inpatient and outpatient rotations; the extern will spend one day per week in each setting throughout the entire training experience. The supervisor on the acute, inpatient units throughout the training year will be Dr. Louis Mora. Of note, this rotation involves both assessment and therapy intervention experiences. The supervisor on the neuropsychological assessment, outpatient rotation will be one (or a combination) of the following: Dr. Mark Sandberg, Dr. Christine Mihaila, or Dr. Thomas Myers. The extern will have at least one, but not likely more than two, of the supervisors on this rotation. This rotation is exclusively an outpatient assessment experience. More information about experiences and expectations for each of these rotations follows below.

Inpatient Rotation

The Northport VA maintains two inpatient units which support the full range of acute psychological presenting problems. Each unit has a bed capacity for up to 21 residents and provides treatment to male and female veterans who are culturally and ethnically diverse with a wide range of ages. All veterans and active duty servicemembers are eligible for treatment, but the population is generally comprised of veterans who served during Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), and the Vietnam War. The inpatient program as a whole utilizes a combination of medication, psychotherapy, and a variety of recreational and psychoeducational activities to create a therapeutic program focused on stabilization and treatment planning for veterans in acute distress. The psychology program focuses on assessment, group psychotherapy, and safety planning. Assessment is typically done via suicide risk screening assessments and abbreviated neuropsychological evaluations typically geared towards diagnostic clarification and discharge planning. Psychological therapies utilized are based on evidence-based therapies from a wide range of psychological orientations. The focus of psychotherapy on the units includes helping to develop veteran's insight into own mental health diagnoses and/or patterns of functioning, enhancing motivation for mental health treatment, psychoeducation about mental illness for both veterans and their families, safety planning for suicide, violence toward others, and substance use risks, and treatment planning for a range of psychological concerns. There is a substantial focus on substance use disorder recovery and suicide prevention.

During this rotation, the extern will have the opportunity to participate in staff meetings, co-lead both psychotherapy and psychoeducational groups with the supervising psychologist, provide brief individual psychotherapy, develop high quality assessments of and safety plans for suicide, homicide, and domestic violence, and conduct abbreviated neuropsychological assessments. A

large part of this rotational experience includes learning how to be a contributing part of a larger interdisciplinary team comprised of psychiatrist, nurses, social workers, nursing aides, peer support specialists, and recreational therapists.

Neuropsychology Rotation

The neuropsychology rotation will provide the extern the experience of providing outpatient neuropsychological consultation to other healthcare providers (typically those from Neurology, PM&R, Primary Care, and Psychiatry) around issues of differential diagnosis. The majority of referrals are for neuropsychological assessment, where there is known or suspected neurological disturbance related to a wide variety of possible etiologies, including cerebral vascular accidents, head trauma, memory loss of unknown etiology, Alzheimer's disease and other neurocognitive/dementia disorders, and developmental and psychological contributors to reported cognitive difficulty. However, the extern will occasionally also conduct psychodiagnostic assessments, where psychopathology is the presenting concern and differential diagnosis is desired. The extern will develop their skills in selecting and administering assessment measures (including performance and symptom validity tests) to help answer referral questions and using findings to elucidate relevant features of a veteran's cognitive functioning for diagnostic determination, patient education, and treatment planning.

The extern is supervised in all aspects of the evaluation process, including the clinical interview, administration and interpretation of appropriate test batteries, report writing, and provision of feedback to veterans and their family members. There is an expectation that the extern will gain increased independence in each of these areas across their externship. Externs can expect to develop their knowledge of brain-behavior relationships through direct supervision, exposure to a wide range of presenting problems, and utilization of scientific research for each case. Supervisors are all board certified in Clinical Neuropsychology, and one is additionally boarded in Rehabilitation Psychology.

Recommended prior experience

Externs need to have some basic assessment experience (typically outside of classwork) to participate in this externship, including administration of intelligence measures (e.g., Wechsler instruments), as well as neuropsychological and personality measures. Prospective externs should also have basic report writing experience. This rotation is a particularly good fit for those with a professional interest in assessment. Preference will be given to students who have already completed at least one year of relevant externship experience (or equivalent).

Rotation Days: Flexible

Supervisors: Christine J. Mihaila, Ph.D., ABPP-CN, Louis Mora, Ph.D., Thomas Myers, Ph.D., ABPP-CN, Mark Sandberg, Ph.D., ABPP-RP, ABN

Iraq and Afghanistan Wars Readjustment Program

This program is geared to addressing the mental health needs of those who have served in the Iraq and Afghanistan war zones. It emphasizes making mental health services accessible to active duty military personnel and to veterans. In this year-long training experience, externs do initial interviews and provide individual psychoanalytic psychotherapy consistent with the evidence-based practice of psychotherapy. The therapy model is based on principles of

psychotherapy that can guide the practice of therapy for the range of DSM diagnoses. PTSD is a frequent presenting problem in this clinic. However, since about 80% of PTSD cases involve co-morbidity with such other diagnoses as substance use disorders, depression, generalized anxiety disorder, and personality disorders, our focus is on preparing externs to address such co-morbidity in their practice of psychotherapy for trauma-related conditions. Weekly individual supervision is provided. Externs also participate in supervision in a group format, which includes interns and post-doctoral fellows in addition to externs, on a weekly basis. The open-dialogue model of supervision is intended to encourage open, mutual, detailed discussion of participants' psychotherapy cases with a focus on their use of core elements of effective psychotherapy. This model allows participants the opportunity to benefit from, in addition to discussion of their own work, the discussion of the work of their fellow participants. It also allows for participants' furthering their supervisory skills, as they collaboratively facilitate the process of group members' open dialogue about their work. The groups' co-supervisors will provide readings on theory, research, and practice related to issues addressed in the course of supervision.

Case Load: 8-10 individuals

Group Supervision: 1 hour

Individual Supervision: 1 hour

Recommended year of training or experience: Preferably at least a year of supervised psychotherapy training

Days: Fridays are mandatory (for supervision); second day flexible

Supervisors: Stephen Long, PhD; Melody Millando-Wirtenson, PhD

Primary Care – Mental Health Integration and Health Promotion Disease Prevention (HPDP)

PC-MHI staff and trainees work collaboratively with the medical teams in the Primary Care (PC) clinics. The medical teams in PC provide comprehensive outpatient medical services to over 16,000 veterans annually. The teams work in a medical home model, known in the VA as Patient Aligned Care Teams (PACTs). PC-MHI is considered an extension of the PACT. Social workers, nutritionists, and pharmacists also serve as extended team members. PC-MHI externs work in the PC clinics alongside the PACTs and other extended team members. Veterans present with a range of psychopathology such that interventions may be focused on treatment of a clinical condition or the behavioral intervention of a medical problem. Same day access to care and an active environment allows ample opportunity for consultation.

Health Promotion Disease Prevention (HPDP) is a health psychology and preventative medicine program running hospital wide. HPDP programs consist of Smoking Cessation, Diabetes support, weight management (MOVE! Behavioral medicine classes and support group), wellness clinic, mindfulness meditation and CBT for chronic pain. The chronic pain and mindfulness programs are embedded in Primary Care and well -integrated with PC teams, but

function as part of the health promotion disease prevention programming allowing all veterans access and not just the PACT team veterans.

Possible clinical activities: Externs spend 1.5 days in PC-MHI providing short-term focused individual psychotherapy utilizing evidence based approaches such as motivational interviewing and cognitive-behavioral approaches (e.g., CBT-I, CBT-pain). Training in EBPs will be provided at the start of the year.

Externs will also receive training in and conduct initial and same day assessments in consultation with the PACTs.

Externs may also participate in HPDP programming, most often Mindfulness for Stress Reduction, the MOVE! weight management group, the Pain Management group, and/or the Smoking Cessation Program. Opportunities for participation in program evaluation are also available.

Recommended year of training or experience by start of externship: 3rd year and above

Days: Thursdays/ Tuesdays.

Thursdays are required to allow for participation in the PC-MHI interdisciplinary team (IDT) meeting, which includes all PC-MHI staff (psychologists, psychiatrist, care managers), psychology and psychiatry fellows, psychology interns, PC-MHI extern, and the Health Behavior Coordinator. The IDT meeting is used for case presentations, clinical discussions, and the disposition of cases for treatment. Pain management runs on Thursdays and has typically been a strong training experience for the extern. Tuesdays are preferred for the second day so that externs might participate in the Mindfulness Stress Reduction clinic. Participation in other Health Promotion programs has typically included Tobacco Cessation individual outreach and support. Possible opportunities for weight management, Diabetes support exist on Thursdays.

Supervisors: Deirdra Frum- Vassallo, PsyD, Nyasanu Barbee, PhD

Psychosocial Rehabilitation Recovery Center and Mental Health Clinic

The PRRC is an outpatient program for veterans who are diagnosed with a serious and persistent mental illness. This includes diagnoses such as MDD, Schizophrenia, PTSD, Bipolar Disorder, etc. Veterans who attend PRRC represent a broad range of functioning levels, from veterans who reside in supportive housing to veterans who are independent in all domains. The program is based upon the Recovery Model and is managed by a psychologist. The PRRC provides a structured, supportive environment within which veterans can develop the skills and confidence necessary to live satisfying lives and to function successfully in the community. It empowers veterans to take control of their lives by becoming actively involved in their recovery, in the program itself, and in the outside community. The multidisciplinary treatment team includes staff from Psychology, Social Work, and Nursing. Peer support technicians are also on the staff and offer a unique perspective for our veterans. Therapeutic activities include intensive process oriented psychotherapy groups, psycho-educational/skills groups,

recreation/socialization groups and self-help activities. Veterans are scheduled to attend the program from one to five days per week depending on their needs as determined collaboratively by the treatment team and veteran.

The MHC is open to all veterans seeking mental health services. The population of patients presenting to MHC are therefore quite varied, including the full range of psychopathology and life cycle related issues.

Possible clinical activities: Externs in PRRC may attend community and staff meetings, lead and co-lead groups, and participate fully in treatment planning and implementation. Group opportunities include mood disorder and PTSD process groups, Holistic Health, Coping with PTSD, Positive Thinking (CBT-D), ACT, Brain Health, Mindfulness Meditation, and Weight Management. We welcome extern initiative in the development of new groups. When requested by veterans there are opportunities to provide brief individual evidence based interventions.

Externs also have the option of gaining experience in an administrative role by assisting the director of PRRC and/or the director of training with the functioning of these programs.

Externs spend .5 day in the MHC delivering individual psychotherapy, and assisting with all aspects of treatment planning. Given the range of presentations, externs tailor the treatment to the needs of the individual. This may include psychodynamic, CBT, or third wave approaches. Referrals for complex personality cases and couples work may also be available.

At the time of this writing PRRC groups are offered virtually, in person, and hybrid. In MHC individual sessions are being offered in person and virtually.

Recommended year of training or experience: flexible

Days: T, W Th, F; T allows for process group

Supervisors: Margaret Rayne, PsyD; Amy Tal, PhD

Substance Abuse Residential Rehabilitation Treatment Program

The SAR RTP is a residential treatment program for veterans with a substance use disorder who would benefit from a structured and therapeutic environment. In addition to substance dependence the residents typically receive treatment for co-occurring medical and/or psychiatric issues. The 30 residents participate in substance abuse treatment, vocational rehabilitation and self-help groups. Externs function as members of a multidisciplinary team, which includes staff from Psychology, Vocational Rehabilitation, Social Work, Nursing, and Recreation.. Externs who participate in the SAR RTP rotation gain experience in complex case conceptualization. Additionally, externs enhance skills through conducting a bio-psycho-social assessment and an individualized treatment plan for each assigned resident on the extern's caseload.

Possible clinical activities: Externs participate in group therapy, individual therapy, community meetings and staff meetings. They lead (both independently and in co-therapy) psychoeducational groups including Anger Management, Money Management and possibly Relapse Prevention, Health and Wellness or Positive Relationship Skills. Externs also serve as primary therapists by providing individual psychotherapy to up to four SARRTP residents at any given time. At this time all groups and individual sessions take place in person.

Recommended year of training or experience: flexible

Days: Of the two days for this rotation, Thursday is mandatory. For the second day, Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday are preferred.

Supervisors: Crista Maracic, PhD; Tracy French, PsyD; Michelle Castellano, PhD

Eligibility

To be eligible for externship placement an extern must be in good standing at an APA or CPA accredited doctoral program in psychology

Note: The VA healthcare system requires:

- [Am I Eligible? Checklist for VA HPTs](#), or see summary below:
- The Federal Government requires that male applicants to VA positions who were born after 12/31/59 must sign a Pre-appointment Certification Statement for Selective Service Registration before they are employed.
- All interns will have to complete a Certification of Citizenship in the United States prior to beginning the internship. VA will not consider applications from anyone who is not currently a U.S. citizen.
- VA conducts drug screening exams on randomly selected personnel as well as new employees. Interns are not required to be tested prior to beginning work, but once on staff they are subject to random selection as are other staff. Interns are also subject to fingerprinting and background checks. Match result and selection decisions are contingent upon passing these screens.
Please see the following link for more info: [VA Drug-Free Workplace Program Guide for Veterans Health Administration Health Professions Trainees](#)
Please note marijuana and products containing THC are currently illegal under federal policy.
- To comply with federal and VA rules and provide interns with liability protection, a current and valid Affiliation Agreement between VA and the sponsoring doctoral program must be on file before the intern can be appointed. Most APA-approved doctoral programs already have an agreement on file.
- VA training occurs in a health setting. The university will receive a Trainee Qualifications and Credentials Verification Letter which confirms interns are enrolled in the university, have met physical requirements of the university, and meet VA health requirements. For the purpose of VA health requirements, trainees are expected to provide verification to their university TDs of hepatitis B vaccination (or signed declination waiver), and tuberculosis screening. Maintaining a current flu vaccination, or taking preventative measure to limit patient exposure to the flu, will be required during the training year. COVID vaccination or documented exemption is required. HPTs can request medical or religious exemption from the COVID-19 vaccine using [VA form 10-263](#). The person who signs the TQCVL should sign as Supervisor on the request. DEOs must maintain copies of approved exemptions along with the TQCVL. However, it is at the discretion of the Medical Center Director and Chief of Staff whether to accept the TQCVL and thereby whether to accept HPT COVID vaccine exemptions.

Application Process

Please email Amy.Tal@va.gov

- a) a cover letter specifying **up to two tracks** of interest (if you express interest in two tracks you may be invited to interview for one or both)
- b) a CV
- c) two letters of recommendation

Phone: (631) 261- 4400 ext. 5805

*The Northport VAMC externship program adheres to the application guidelines outlined by PSYDNYS.